Miranda
Revue pluridisciplinaire du monde anglophone / Multidisciplinary peer-reviewed journal on the English-speaking world

3 | 2010
Lolita : Examining "the Underside of the Weave"

Jason Marc Harris, *Folklore and the Fantastic in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction*

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Electronic version
URL: http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/1677
DOI: 10.4000/miranda.1677
ISSN: 2108-6559

Publisher
Université Toulouse - Jean Jaurès

Electronic reference
Laurence Talairach-Vielmas, "Jason Marc Harris, *Folklore and the Fantastic in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction*", *Miranda* [Online], 3 | 2010, Online since 26 November 2010, connection on 16 February 2021. URL: http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/1677 ; DOI: https://doi.org/10.4000/miranda.1677

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REFERENCES

Jason Marc Harris, Folklore and the Fantastic in 19th-century British Fiction (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 235 p, ISBN 978–0-7546-5766-8

1 Jason Marc Harris's *Folklore and the Fantastic in 19th-century British Fiction* aims to examine how Victorian artists and writers "transformed folk beliefs and motifs for aesthetic, historical, and scientific ends" (vii). Harris looks at what he terms "folk narratives", "folk legends (volksagen)" and fairy tales (märchen) so as to analyse how authors rework "folk metaphysics" into prose narratives. In fact, Harris contends, because the Victorian period is branded by rationalism, the reworking of such "folk metaphysics" and its clash with rationalism produces the literary fantastic. Thus, by showing that Victorian narratives interacted with folklore, Harris intends to foreground ideological tensions.

2 Chapter 1 focuses on folklore and the fantastic in 19th-century British literature and on the resistance entailed by rationality and religion. Harris seeks to identify stances towards folklore and how folklore could work within fantasy and the fantastic as a mode. The revision of folkloric material gave rise to "conflicted rhetoric" (1), revealing the "hybrid cultural consciousness" (1) of both writers and audience. As Harris explains, in the Victorian period, science was investigating superstitions (including religious beliefs), as in the case of paleontology and geology which searched the earth's history and remains, often undermining literalist accounts of Genesis. At the same time, "unorthodox forms of spirituality" developed, typified by the development of spiritualism and the fascination with ghosts. In fact, pseudo-scientific experiments

partook of a desire to explain supernatural phenomena by natural laws still undiscovered by man. As a result, the fantastic in literature often allowed science and the supernatural to merge. Fairy tales were reworked to provide relief from an overwhelming modernity—or from the prevalence of realism in art and utilitarianism in philosophy. So, Harris shows how these folkloric narratives "are not escapist dreams that deny or displace repressed fears and anxieties" but "stories that represent focused articulations of concerns close to the Victorian heart, mind, and soul" (35).

3 Chapter 2, on literary fairy tales and their function, looks at the way the Victorians re-used fairy tales, either as forms of parody or satire (in the first half of the period) or as moralising and didactic narratives, in order "to resolve the tension between innovation and tradition" (38). As Harris argues, the prevalence of literary fairy tales (kunstmärchen) and the effacement of folk fairy tales (volksmärchen) brings to light the Victorians' will to "minimize the unreality of fairy tales" (38), even though folklore remained of interest, as typified by the collection of oral narratives and imitation of oral narratives. Harris criticizes Jack Zipes, U.C. Knoepflmacher and Nina Auerbach, arguing that their analyses fail to probe what happens to the marvellous in the tale's treatment of folk motifs. Still, the fairy tales he looks at are merely the fairy tales that can be found today in Zipes's, Patrick Hearn's or Knoepflmacher and Auerbach's anthologies. Harris also examines Nesbit's ambivalent treatment of science, denouncing modern technology while simultaneously praising the enchantment of science, and F.M. Ford's use of anachronism to create the literary fantastic.

4 Chapter 3 focuses more particularly on "fairy-tale fantasies" by George MacDonald and James Barrie, demonstrating how the folkloric tradition is recurrently used to enhance the bleak sides of English civilization—hence running counter to fairy-tale resolution and ideals. Harris explains how works of MacDonald and Barrie diverge more sharply from fairy tales, and how the authors use fantasy as an alternative vision to realism—using fantasy therefore to criticize society or to provide moral instruction. He brings to light MacDonald's didacticism, though MacDonald was familiar with Scottish lore, legends and tales. In fact, Harris contends, MacDonald's handling of fairy-tale motifs, often reconciling pagan and Christian perspectives, brings forth his didacticism. Harris also analyses MacDonald's mixing of folk beliefs and anthropological theories of folklore or evolutionary views on the Little People in his treatment of goblins and their bestial representation in order to bring to light the Scottish writer's weaving of modernity and mythology. He also places side by side MacDonald's powerful female characters, associated with folk traditions, and his concerns with bourgeois morality and behaviour in the tradition of the Grimm Brothers and Hans Christian Andersen—eventually arguing that MacDonald "produces hesitation through violating the conventional assumptions of the fairy-tale genre". In the case of J.M. Barrie, Harris looks at Barrie's equation between children and fairies to illustrate "the conflicted moral nature of children" (82), fairies being cruel and soulless creatures. Thus, Peter Pan's use of fairies and folklore often serves to mark the gap between childhood and adulthood, folklore enabling Barrie to foreground the transience of childhood. Chapter 4 elaborates Harris's examination of MacDonald's fantasies, this time focusing on adult fantasies—*Lilith* (1895) and *Phantastes* (1858). In this case, fairy-tale motifs and folk beliefs, Harris argues, are used to deal with Christian metaphysics. Indeed, MacDonald engages with folk metaphysics to underline the tension between spiritual

and material realities and point out ideals. Once again, Harris brings out the pessimistic tone of such folktale motifs and patterns.

5 Chapters 5 and 6 then turn towards far less fairy-like narratives: James Hogg's Gothic tales and Sheridan Le Fanu's ghost stories. In both cases, Harris underlines how "supernatural folklore" articulates tensions, whether it shapes class-distinctions or political conflicts between England and Scotland. As he points out, Le Fanu's use of Irish folklore must be grasped to understand the metaphysics and morality of his stories which feature racialized or vampiric fairies.

6 In Robert Louis Stevenson's fiction, Harris argues in Chapter 7, fairies and the marvellous, just like fantasy and demons, shape images of ethnic, national or imperial conflicts. Finally, in the last chapter, Harris turns towards William Carleton and William Sharp and addresses the question of the Celtic Renaissance through their work to complete his study of how folklore produces the literary fantastic. Once again, the question of the relationship between folk beliefs and "supernatural folklore" and Irish and Scottish nationalism is brought home, and folklore stands at the heart of political and/or religious questions.

7 In conclusion, Harris's study finally contends that folklore and the fantastic were not solely used to trope British instability and polarize classes, races or creeds. In addition to providing a Gothic response to 19th-century anxieties, the narratives Harris studies also aim to make room for folklore by showing how the latter is not incompatible with cultural progress. However, it is often difficult to understand where Harris is going and the point that the book intends to make. Harris's study is neither chronological nor logical in the choice of narratives and writers. As a consequence, readers may feel lost among the constant shifts in time and period or by the merging of fairies, magic, the marvellous, fairy-tale motifs and patterns, with demons, devils or ghosts. Though Harris offers definitions of fairy tales, "folkloric fairy tales" or "supernatural folklore", the vision of fairies either as vampires or ghosts may shatter all our certainties about literary categories and the meaning of motifs and patterns which we traditionally associate with such creatures.

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Mots-clés: contes de fées victoriens, fantasies, folklore, surnaturel
Keywords: Victorian fairy tales, fantasies, folklore, the supernatural

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